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Friendless bird! How is it possible for her to rear such a numerous family, when surrounded by so many enemies. Not only does man contrive many schemes to entrap them, but many of the rapacious quadrupeds and birds are ever ready to make them their prey. The mink follows them in the woods with as unerring skill as does the setter dog, while the red-tailed hawk hunts them in more open ground.

THE GREAT AUK.

BY PROFESSOR JAMES ORTON.

THE recent addition of a specimen of this rare bird to the Smithsonian Museum, is an event worthy of record. There are now three specimens in the United States; the one just mentioned, another in the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, and a third in the Giraud Cabinet in Vassar College. The last is the most perfect specimen, and certainly possesses the greatest historical value, as it is the one from which Audubon made his drawing and description. It was caught on the banks of Newfoundland.

The Great Auk or Gare-fowl,* fortunately for itself did not live long enough to receive more than one scientific name—*Alca impennis*. It was about the size of a goose, with a large head, a curved, grooved and laterally flattened bill; wings rudimental, adapted to swimming only, approaching in this respect the penguins of the southern hemisphere. The toes are fully webbed, the hind one wanting; the plumage is black, excepting the under parts, the tips of the wings, and an oval spot in front of each eye, which are white. It was an arctic bird, dwelling chiefly in

*Buffon called it *Le Grand Pengouin*. Moehring adds the tribal name *Chenalopez* (fox goose) to distinguish it from the rest of the *Alcidae*.

the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland, and Newfoundland.* "Degraded as it were from the feathered rank (said Nuttall), and almost numbered with the amphibious monsters of the deep, the Auk seems condemned to dwell alone in those desolate and forsaken regions of the earth." But it was an unrivalled diver, and swam with great velocity. One chased by Mr. Bullock among the Northern Isles, left a six-oared boat far behind. It was undoubtedly a match for the Oxfords. It was finally shot, however, and is now in the British Museum. "It is observed by seamen," wrote Buffon a hundred years ago, "that it is never seen out of soundings, so that its appearance serves as an infallible direction to the land." It fed on fishes and marine plants, and laid either in the clefts of the rocks or in deep burrows a solitary egg, five inches long, with curious markings, resembling Chinese characters. The only noise it was known to utter was a gurgling sound. Once very abundant on both shores of the North Atlantic, it is now believed to be entirely extinct, none having been seen or heard of alive since 1844, when two were taken near Iceland.†

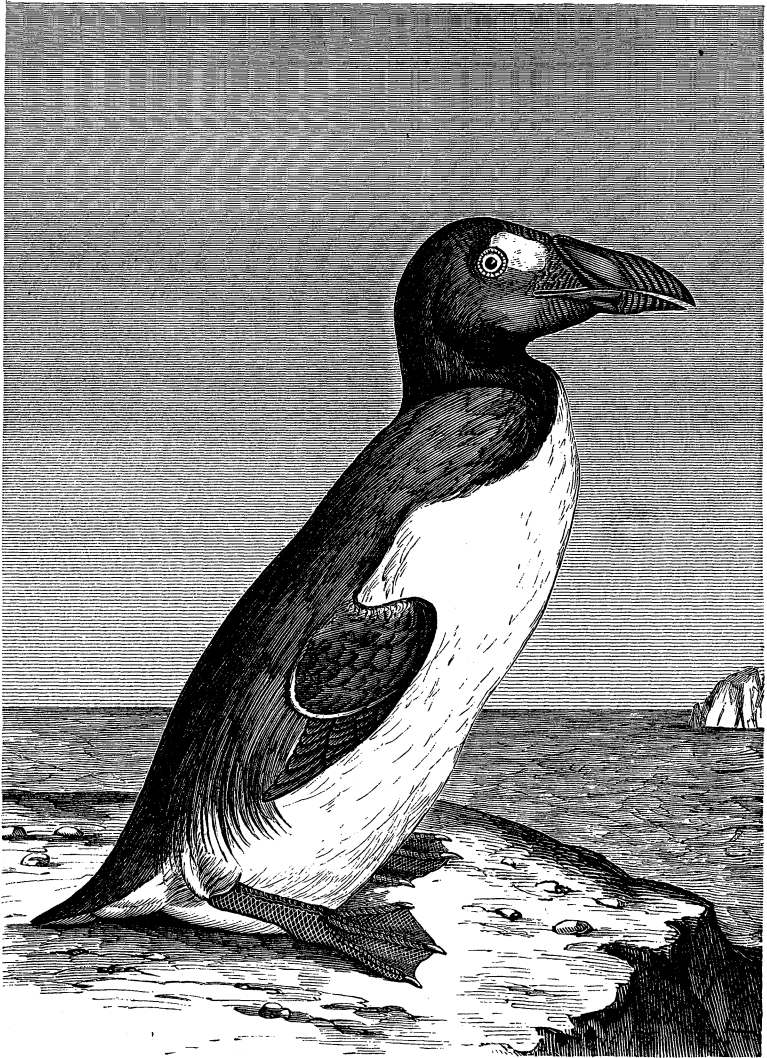
The death of a species is a more remarkable event than the end of an imperial dynasty. In the words of Darwin, "no fact in the long history of the world is so startling as the wide and repeated extermination of its inhabitants." What an epoch will that moment be when the last man shall give up the ghost! The upheaval or subsidence of strata, the encroachments of other animals, and climatal revolutions—by which of these great causes of extinction now slowly but

* Audubon records the statement that formerly "Penguins were plentiful about Nahant and some other islands in the bay." But the old gunner, who gave him the information, must have meant the Razor-billed Auk.

[That the Great Auk was once very abundant on our New England shores, is proved beyond a doubt by the large number of its bones that have been found in the ancient "Shellheaps" scattered along the coast from British America to Massachusetts. The "old hunter" who told Audubon of its having been found at Nahant, was undoubtedly correct in his statement, as we have bones of the species taken from the Shellheaps of Marblehead, Eagle Hill in Ipswich, and Plumb Island, and Mr. Elliot Cabot has informed me that an old fisherman living in Ipswich described a bird to him, that was captured by his father in Ipswich many years ago, which, from the description, Mr. Cabot was convinced was a specimen of the Great Auk. — F. W. P.]

† Owen makes this singular mistake: "The Great Auk existed in the last century; no specimen has been obtained in the present."

Fig. 83.



The GREAT AUK, *Alca impennis* Linnæus.
Copied from Audubon, Plate 465.

incessantly at work in the organic world, the Great Auk departed this life, we cannot say. We know of no changes on our northern coast sufficient to affect the conditions necessary to the existence of this oceanic bird. It has not been hunted down like the Dodo and Dinornis. The numerous bones on the shores of Greenland, Newfoundland, Iceland and Norway, attest its former abundance; but within the last century it has gradually become more and more scarce, and finally extinct. There is no better physical reason why some species perish than why man does not live forever. We can only say with Buffon, "it died out because time fought against it." From the *Lingula prima* to the Auk, genera have been constantly losing species, and species varieties; types and links are disappearing.

Still more mysterious than the extirpation of species, but equally interesting, is their coming into being. We must not expect this event to be conspicuous. We suppose that the ushering in of the puny sloth was as quietly and inappreciably done as the annihilation of its gigantic prototype, the Megatherium. We are rather compelled to believe in the continual formation of "incipient species" to take the place of those that have expired. But how? By transmutation or special creation? We will not decide; but we must hold to one or the other, or else believe there are far fewer species now than when man was added to the world's fauna. For how many animals which figure in Pleistocene strata are missing in the Recent Life! "That a renovating force, which has been in full operation for millions of years, should cease to act while the causes of extinction are still in full activity or even intensified by the occasion of man's destroying power, seems to me in the highest degree improbable."*

* Lyell's *Antiquity of Man*, p. 394.